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The Vietnam press: the unrealised ambition

Frank Palmos

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Reporting Asia Series
The Vietnam Press:
The Unrealised Ambition

Frank Palmos

**Centre for Asian Communication,
Media and Cultural Studies
Director and Series Editor -
Dr. Brian Shoesmith**

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Faculty of Arts

Edith Cowan University

2 Bradford Street

Mount Lawley

Western Australia. 6050.

Telephone: (61 9) 370 6111

Facsimile: (61 9) 370 6668

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Introduction

This series of Occasional Papers is designed to bring to the attention of the reader work that focuses on Asian communication and culture. Compared to most areas of Asian Studies, communication and media have been largely ignored, a fact the recent Australian 'push into Asia' reveals. These Occasional Papers redress this absence and deal with a comprehensive range of issues that inform our understanding of the importance of communication in forging links between Australia and Asia. Consequently their scope is far-reaching, covering cultural, political, economic, and increasingly, technological topics and their relationship to the communication process that lies at the heart of Australian/Asian relations. In short, they will chart a new emerging mediascape in the Asia Pacific region. As such they must be viewed as work in progress. The authors published in this series include academics, journalists and post-graduate students from Australia and throughout Asia.

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1. The Media Promises of 1988

"The Press is a tool of the Communist Party. It is not a tool of the Vietnamese people."

- A common complaint voiced by the youth of the Saigon media.

The Vietnam Press has been in many ways in a state of suspended animation since 1988 when in January, at the Round Table Conference in the Rex Hotel in Saigon, the heart of Ho Chi Minh City, incumbent leaders promised many new freedoms, including the introduction of private trading companies, privately owned property, and other freedoms generally associated with a 'marketplace economy.'¹ There was an infectious euphoria in the city that week and even the most cynical of journalists felt a free press was not far off for Vietnam.

The new leaders claimed the media would be included in the reforms which were unveiled in late 1987 and early 1988. But the wide ranging philosophical changes signalled for the entire nation with the 1987 National Assembly adopting the Foreign Investment Code² (thus abandoning the previous disastrous path to Socialism via Collectivisation and the Command Economy inherited from the USSR) did not mention a free press. By 1992 various Party leaders in informal discussions with reporters at press briefings in Saigon were going back on their word. In a free-ranging interview in the headquarters of the Vietnam Journalists Association in Pho Ly Thai To Street on August 12, the former editor of *Nhan Dan* and then recently appointed Vice-President of the Vietnam Journalists Association, Tran Cong Man said: "We have never advocated that the people get a free press. The so called 'free' press of the West is a disgrace. It is violent and negative and sensationalist...(that would be) damaging to national unity. Our press is better; it is positive, and there to help the people stay united." Two years later, in March 1994, the Vietnam press was still under very tight control of the Party - despite the death in October 1993 of Tai Ninh, widely feared, as were his predecessors who were considered by many journalists to be conservative and narrow minded. Tai Ninh was Chairman of the Central Ideology and Culture Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Ninh

had been editor-in-chief of *Nhan Dan* before Tran Cong Man was elevated to this position from his post as general editor.*

The shadow government of the Party, which effectively controls all government from national through regional, municipal and rural levels has left in place the Party's Ideology and Culture Commission throughout this multiplanal structure. Although the name of these committees has varied slightly in translations since 1992, to include the word Education (making it Ideology and Education, instead of Ideology and Culture) the nature and function of these committees who oversee the media has always been clear to the media.³ Moreover, the chiefs-of-staff and editors-in-chief are still either appointed by the Party itself or they are the same people who were there in 1987. Experience in journalism is a prerequisite but one which for untrained editors is easily met by having speeches published in the press.

The expression 'free press' is not used in Vietnam. The Party simply says, when asked about freedoms, that "the press is free to play a positive role in the building of Socialism," and thus justifies any appointments made by saying the appointee understands that his newspaper will then be "free to play a positive role in the building of Socialism." The Party has always sought the cooperation of the press, and made the appointments at senior levels in the press which ensures they mostly get that cooperation. In Government campaigns against corruption or smuggling, for example, the Party arranges for certain departments or the police to leak details of their investigations of certain individuals to the press to open their actions to debate. The press rarely initiates any of these investigations although readers often mistakenly attribute the work to the journalists. "In fact, no journalist would dare begin his own investigation", said the editor of a well-known Saigon publication. However, he refuses to be named for fear of retaliation. This is not to say that the press scene in Vietnam today is not lively and constantly altering or that hope has faded from the agenda of the younger journalists. It is also noteworthy that certain categories of information previously censored by the Party are now published. This policy has given a small measure of freedom and even harsh critics admit the information now available to the public through the daily press has a much broader base than before 1987. An example of this was the Party's long-held belief that publishing news of damages

* I use the word Commission on the advice of a senior, independent Editor, who says the city or regional bodies are commonly called Committees, but Hanoi's body is the Commission.

or loss of life or materials caused by bad weather, floods, cyclones or drought would lower Vietnam's image in the eyes of the outside world.⁴ No bad news of any nature was published if the Party could prevent it.

Airline crashes, natural disasters, corruption convictions, crime waves, refugees fleeing the country, religious unrest and especially border-clashes were never covered by the national press, let alone printed. That these events occurred quickly became a 'public secret.'

Foreign radio broadcasts carrying reports from international agencies monitoring natural disasters soon became known. Villagers fleeing landslides, floods or famine brought news of these occurrences to bigger towns. Senior Vietnam News Agency (hereafter VNA) journalists like Nguyen Khuyen admit today they knew about most of these events but at the time agreed with the Party's rulings that publication may have somehow harmed the nation.⁵

By far the most serious issues avoided by the Party - and foreign journalists from the Socialist bloc or crypto-Communist journalists⁶ who fell into line - was the cover-up⁷ of the Pol Pot massacres of the Vietnamese communities within Vietnam's western border and the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia, especially east of the Mekong, between 1975 and 1978.⁸ No official explanation has ever been offered for the news black out other than to say "... we held off, hoping that our Socialist brother (Pol Pot) would see the light."⁹

Today in general news circles the Pot Pot era is studiously avoided. There is an intense dislike in certain quarters for anything Cambodian and the Vietnamese journalists who staffed the various newsagency posts in Phnom Penh after Pol Pot's fall have no desire ever to set foot in Cambodia again and they have openly expressed those sentiments to the author.

Those sentiments were revealed when discussing the black-out on the killing of Vietnamese civilians in 1976 to 1978, a very touchy subject for most Vietnamese journalists. One suspects they deeply regret not pressing the Party to publish the reports of the massacres in those early days, and by not publishing they fell into a propaganda trap set by Beijing and Pol Pot.

This is not the place to discuss the politics of the massacres but this author maintains that no serious discussion on the Vietnam press of this period can begin unless the important subject of the deliberate news black-out of those border

attack reports is examined and some explanations from Army and Party officials of the time are forthcoming. After all, the reports *were* made, by very senior war correspondents such as Nguyen Khuyen.

But the reports were never allowed to go further than the editor-in-chief's desk within the VNA, even after foreign news agencies began reporting the same events.

Some discussion of this background is essential, I believe, to understand why the media in Vietnam today is not given the same freedoms as business in Vietnam's drive to modernise. The considerable momentum of the Party's conservatism on media matters should never be underestimated. The situation with Pol Pot, described above, worsened during 1978 and led to the invasion of Cambodia by Vietnam in December and the subsequent fleeing of the Chinese ambassador in embarrassing circumstances.

The Yugoslav Ambassador in Phnom Penh, Mihaito Lompar, told the author in discussions in Belgrade in 1979 that he and the Chinese Ambassador Sun Hao had "run from Phnom Penh to Battambang", as the Vietnamese forces approached. Until then Pol Pot had boasted they would easily hold out the Vietnamese. But China had to send a Boeing 707 to evacuate Cambodian leaders, their own Embassy staff, four of Lompar's Yugoslav embassy staff and Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who until then had been held captive by Pol Pot. "We were all caught by surprise. The Chinese, of course, had the most to lose. The Khmer Rouge were dreaming if they thought they could hold off Vietnamese forces."

The Vietnamese army did not invite the Vietnamese press along on this invasion, although by the end of the invasion in January, 1979, there were several VNA journalists in Phnom Penh. The VNA published only brief reports of the first days of the invasion which began on 24 December.

China responded to the huge loss of its foothold in Cambodia through its protege Pol Pot by invading Vietnam a few weeks later, in February 1979. Vietnam closed the country to all correspondents except those from Communist newspapers. The first foreign journalist killed in this war was a Japanese correspondent from the Japanese Socialist Press, who was picked off by a Chinese sniper on the Vietnam-China border north of Lao Cai.

By the time the CPV allowed reports of the Chinese invasion or even the Pol Pot massacres to be published the Western press had uncovered most of the facts of the invasion and evacuation from refugees crossing into Thailand, or diplomats in Hanoi and Phnom Penh, no thanks to Vietnam.¹⁰ In the years following the Chinese invasion and into the 1980s Vietnam remained closed to foreign media. Even visiting, sympathetic writers from Socialist countries were escorted.

Such was the paranoia that reports of natural disasters, especially bad weather, were censored. A senior guide (and former VNA soldier) from the Hanoi Foreign Press Centre recalled in 1990 that when accompanying a party of Hungarian journalists to Danang in 1982 he was called to a room in the USSR-built Pacific Hotel and given orders on what the visitors would see and would not see.

The guide was also told never to allow foreign guests, even guests from other Socialist nations, to visit rooms above the third floor because the hotel's water supply system could not lift water above three floors and because the electrical switches gave shocks. The guide, a regular visitor to Danang, said the hotel's problems were never aired in the local press.

Danang had only days earlier suffered severe storm damage and several coastal villages just south of the regional capital had been destroyed and many lives lost. "Everyone in the city was talking about it and a blind person could see the villagers streaming in looking for help. But the Hungarians never did find out about it." The weather issue, however, worked itself out after 1988. Indeed, once it was realised that foreign sympathy funds from both government and private sources flowed into Vietnam after natural disasters the coverage of these disasters was highlighted in all government media. 'Beating up' is a term that springs readily to mind to describe the new vigour with which floods, hurricanes and earthquakes are now being reported. The matter loses its humour when reporters discuss the gravity of earlier disasters, when news of immense losses of human life and materials was blacked out.¹¹

Still, serious censorship remained until 1990, and today, there is still no doubt about where the ultimate control of the media lies. Despite the rhetoric about freeing up channels of public information, no independent publishing licence has ever been issued in Vietnam since the fall of Saigon in April 1975.

Nor has any media outlet dared to raise the issue of the need for a multi-party system, which is by far the most common subject of day-to-day political

discussions. "The Communist Party knows best for the people of Vietnam. No other authority is needed." That quote is frequently heard from the current Prime Minister, Vo Van Kiet, whenever the matter is even hinted at during press conferences. At the time of writing, the Vietnamese New Year had long been celebrated and GNP increases of 8 per cent and the general economic activity have buoyed up the nation.¹² But a free media remains an unrealised ambition.

2. Some Unresolved Issues

Below is by no means a full list of the unresolved issues but for the media now emerging in a 'market economy' environment in Vietnam it covers the main areas of contention. At the centre of every discussion, always, is the Communist Party of Vietnam and its insistence on total control of the information apparatus and its traditional Soviet-style interpretation of the expression 'free press'. To make sense of this intransigence, I will discuss the following issues.

1. Licensing of the media.
2. Patrolling of the media.
3. Staffing of the media.
4. Training of the media.
5. Material supplies to the media.
6. Access to Information by the media.
7. Distribution of media products.
8. Radio and TV frequency controls.

2.1 Licensing of the Media

The Workers Party of Vietnam (CPV) at its inception on 3 February 1930, adopted and has since followed in the main the USSR-Stalinist interpretations and philosophies on mass communications. The realisation of these policies are seen in Vietnam today:

- The state owns the communications outlets such as radio and television stations;

-
- The state owns the largest newspapers in Vietnam, the largest book publishing company, and the only national news agency;
 - The state issues licences for all publications. There are no exceptions.

For an independent publisher to begin publishing a magazine which may include in its columns advice to housewives on cooking and preparing food, they must first obtain a licence. If they do not, and do not follow State directives on all publishing matters, they will never succeed in the venture.¹³ The Party in this way totally controls by licence the means of mass communications - even harmless pamphlets - in Vietnam today. A close watch is also kept on foreign language publications, although this is becoming increasingly difficult. But for a foreign language publication to be published in the Vietnamese language, as the author's *Ridding the Devils* was in 1991, special approval is required. The author's licence number 140/VHKH for *Thoat Khoi Tu Than* ensured its success in a book-starved community. For the author this meant that the book in English could use the same approval number and be sold within Vietnam. So widely known (and enforced) is this publishing code that the managers of all hotels in which *Ridding the Devils* was sold asked to sight the approval document and check the publishing number before placing the book on their shelves.¹⁴

The Party uses its power to grant licences as the first of the major controls. Once the licence is given, there are other controls. Licence withdrawal or cancellation, however, is rarely used to curb or control content. Usually, the publication continues with the Party appointing a new editor and 'retiring' the offending or rebellious editor.

When, in August 1989, Vu Kim Hanh was dismissed from the most popular southern newspaper *Tuoi Tre* (Youth) for (among other things) calling the North Koreans 'robots' and writing about Ho Chi Minh's personal life, fellow journalists suspected the strong hand of Nguyen Vanh Linh, then Vietnam Communist Party Secretary-General.

They were right. Not only did Linh (who had Vu Kim Hanh's deputy appointed in her place) remove her, he led a crack-down on the rapidly growing semi-free press in the south. The editor of the VCP's southern newspaper *Saigon Giai Phong To Hoa* was retired and according to the research staff of the Saigon News Reader many small publications were closed down. By the end of 1989 there was a widespread feeling of disappointment within media circles in Ho Chi Minh City

and those journalists affected by the reversion to what they called 'the old ways' showed their displeasure by deliberately using the name Saigon again, refusing to use the new VCP name, Ho Chi Minh City. That habit soon became engrained until today local journalists always refer to themselves as 'The Saigon Press.'

This form of control has proven effective either as a fact (see above) or as a threat to the editors who realise they risk removal, not demotion. Once at the top there are two future paths; permanence as editor (and graceful retirement to membership of an advisory board) or dismissal.

The celebrated case of Kim Hanh's dismissal caused Kim, the chief editor of Saigon's very popular *Tuoi Tre* (Youth) newspaper, to be removed from her job. But Hanh the wife of a prominent VNA journalist, was in trouble with the VCP on two counts, the second being that she ran a story quoting a third source which claimed to reveal that Uncle Ho Chi Minh had not been as pure and celibate as the Party had painted him in all literature since his death. Hanh ran excerpts from journals printed outside Vietnam which described one of Ho's long-term girlfriends and mentioned there had been others.

The Party launched a dirty tricks campaign on Hanh, saying she was wrong, that the original articles on Ho - judiciously not mentioning the publications should that arouse more interest - had besmirched the name of the glorious leader. "It was a stupid campaign," said one of the female Vietnamese press officers in the Foreign Press Centre. "Everyone above 40 years of age knew Uncle Ho had girlfriends. They all know most of the Central Committee had young cadres down in their special bungalows on the West Lake (in Hanoi). There is no possibility of keeping these secrets in Hanoi. All it did was draw attention to the story and start people drawing up lists of who had been keeping company with Uncle Ho."¹⁵

Hanh survived that trial by slander, only to be removed when she wrote after a visit to North Korea that it was "a land of robots" and had "a despicable government." She referred to North Korea as a nation where people wore false smiles, responded to questions like automatons or sleep walkers and were clearly terrorised into keeping permanent, stupid smiles on their faces. The Kim Sung government of North Korea formally protested to the Communist Party in Hanoi, saying Hanh's reports were lies and slander.

When Hanh was removed, two senior male journalists told the author they thought Hanh had shown great editorial courage and that the Party had shown poor judgement in using the North Korean articles as the excuse. Nguyen Van Lin's 1989 crackdown was extremely unpopular.

In a very brief discussion, which took place at the Foreign Office, Hanoi, (in the presence of Hanoi Foreign Press Centre staff in November, 1989) Nguyen Van Linh expressed surprise that I should ask again about press freedoms guaranteed at the Round Table Conference. "What we are doing is curbing excesses. It will annoy the people and they will become angry if the press forgets its role."

The two editors who defended Hanh claimed the North Korean government and Kim Il Sung in particular, were detested by all Vietnamese who had the misfortune to travel or be posted in that country. Hanh retired from her newspaper post in some glory, being especially applauded by diplomats who had served in Pyong Yang and despised the country and the system there. At the time of my last Hanoi interview (March, 1994) for this paper it was accepted and common knowledge in the Foreign Office in Hanoi that getting staff for the Pyong Yang post was very difficult. The posts there are now rated as punishment.¹⁶ Hanh today is hardly on the outer circles of journalism. She is a successful freelance writer in Ho Chi Minh City, and her husband's position as senior journalist on the VNA was apparently never under threat.

2.2 Patrolling of the Media

By 'Patrolling the Media', I mean the constant vigilance by the Party on editorial or broadcast content and media staff. The Communist Party maintains at every level a censorship committee which operates under auspices of the Department of Ideology and Culture and to a lesser extent the Ministry of Culture, Information, Sports and Tourism. The ministers and key personnel in these ministries are Vietnam Communist Party Central Committee appointees, and it was these three bodies who convened, in August, 1990, a national conference on publishing.

It appeared the VCP was concerned that the press was taking too seriously the Round Table Conference promises of freedom of publication. Scores of small, unlicensed pamphlets and other publications had appeared, many of them dealing

with non-political, harmless subjects like *'Repairing a Video Recorder'* a pamphlet ruled illegal because, the authorities said, the author would have known all video recorders had to be licensed and the pamphlet "would incite readers into using illegal video recorders." The author was in Hanoi during this important conference, but despite requests to the Hanoi Foreign Press centre's director Nguyen Cong Quang for progress reports on the conference, none were forthcoming. Within a few months the outcome of the conference in the form of directives to publishers and journalists, were obvious. The Vietnam Communist Party Central Committee's Committee for Ideology and Culture had "stepped up vigilance and heightened educational procedures," a term of irony used by a senior Ho Chi Minh City Foreign Press centre guide, who later left to freelance in journalism.

At national, regional, municipal and hamlet levels the censorship committees (Ideology and Culture) became very active once more. In these committees, the chairman is the chief censor.¹⁷ Where there are doubts, he refers the matter to the next level, right up to the Central Committee of the Party, which is the ultimate decision maker, although the Ministries of Ideology and Culture and Education are expected to deal with serious problems before they go to the full Politbureau. Ordinary government in reality, plays a small role in this. This is a Party matter. The chief censors call meetings every Friday to discuss 'matters of national policy' which have been raised during the week, or to direct news editors on how an upcoming news item should be handled. If there is no particular matter to discuss the officers will simply give 'reinforcing indoctrination'. Many staff writers on even well-known national newspapers have never attended more than a handful of these meetings. But their chief editors must attend regularly, and when called to discuss a specific report they ignore the invitations at their peril. Patrolling the media by means of reading the regular output of the newspapers, listening to all radio programs and watching all TV programs, is done openly. What is not so overt is the patrolling of international telephone calls and fax messages. When in 1990 and 1991 many foreign company representatives complained of their international business calls taking too long to be connected, the patrolling of international telephone lines was softened. But not before an avalanche of complaints by foreign business people staying in Government hotels like the Rex (where the secret police had an office) and the *Cuu Long* (better known as the Majestic) where even the switchboard operators listened in to their conversations.¹⁸

The foreign community was alerted to the 'listening post' in the Saigon Telecom's (DGPT) main telephone exchange by two means. French businessmen were easily able to call Paris, for example, but Hungarian or Italian businessmen were subject to long delays. An embarrassed official admitted, off the record, that they had difficulty finding Italian and Hungarian speaking Vietnamese to monitor the calls. The French got through because so many Saigoneses understood French.¹⁹ But today (1995) fax messages still pass through a central distribution room in the Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City headquarters of the DGPT (Vietnam's Telecom). This distribution room is sealed off from day-to-day operations rooms where there is a large staff of 'foreign' experts at work.. The 'foreign' experts are still required to operate the modern, sophisticated equipment at this stage of Vietnam's development.

The censorship operations has brought about several difficult situations for these foreign telecommunications experts who must pretend to believe that no censorship occurs. The difficulties arise when poor handling or poor maintenance of the equipment inside the sealed room causes breakdowns in the general telecommunications room. Those foreigners in charge of these operations subtly call for "Asian solutions to unavoidable mishaps", but the foreign technicians point out the problem is one of ignorance or incompetence, both of which, with training, can be overcome. The stand-offs occur when the Vietnamese insist they can fix the problem themselves. This, according to the technicians, usually endangers the entire project.

When the problems are so serious that the breakdowns in these sealed offices threaten the project and the Party men admit they cannot fix the problem themselves, both sides indulge in extraordinary play acting: "Its ludicrous, 'Alice in Wonderland' stuff." said one senior foreign technician in an interview in December, 1993. "We all know the censors sit in this room listening to telephone calls and reading faxes. Everyone, including telephone operators, knows who the Party men are and what they do. It is a measure of the Party's self-deception to think they are being secretive. After all, we put in the equipment for them. Yet when we are fixing it, we have to pretend it is not in there, and if it is in there it is not in there for what everyone would normally think it is in there for!"

There are humorous and sometimes dramatic sidelights to eavesdropping and other forms of patrolling. One Australian mining representative is very pleased his telephone line was monitored. In October, 1993, he telephoned another mining company representative to meet him at a quiet restaurant. After the meal,

thugs attacked him and were about to steal his wallet and watch when two Vietnamese civilians in turn jumped the thugs and gave them a very professional beating. The thugs were unconscious and lying on the street when the Australians took off, leaving their papers and wallet behind. The next morning one of the 'civilians' called asking him to the Ministry of the Interior. On attending he was given his wallet and papers by the men who had saved him.

Fax machines must be licensed. The licences seem to function today as revenue-earning as well as control devices. Connecting a fax machine requires a call to the local DGPT. Purchase of the machine requires form filling, which starts the licence approval process. Fees must be paid at various stages, and the licence approval may take some months (during which the owner usually operates the machine illegally, risking heavy penalties and confiscation) and finally, a team of DGPT technicians arrive to connect the machine. They also have to be well paid. Despite the difficulties, liberal use is made of fax machines these days now that Vietnamese reporters abroad, especially those travelling with an official delegation, send their reports home by fax. Yet as recent as 1991 hardly any Vietnamese media people had seen a fax machine, let alone operated one.

Patrolling the media also means following certain foreign correspondents. To this day many correspondents have no inkling that their after-hours behaviour in Hanoi, a very conservative city, has caused them the difficulties they encountered when they next applied for a visa.

Even when foreign journalists wish to visit local newspapers there is a good deal of protocol involved and the ensuing meetings comprise a Party man, and meetings in the 1988-1991 years were held up for sometimes an hour or more while the Party man was located.

There is also 'internal patrolling' which covers not only the media but almost every aspect of life in Vietnam. A Party's representative is on staff in every newspaper office, every hotel, major restaurant, airline office, and so on. Foreign guests are often astonished when hotels stop functioning completely while a Party man calls a meeting to discuss some liberal attitude by a staff member, or more arbitrarily, to reassert his position as watchdog and give repetitive indoctrination talks.²⁰

The 'Patroller' is easily spotted in media offices because of the nature of the work. He - and there are no female censors to this author's knowledge - is the one

who reads the copy and looks over others' shoulders while the staff journalists are writing. He is also the only person the chief editor will allow to interrupt his work. These Party men will often even sit in on interviews, uninvited.²¹ In the provinces 'patrolling' is even more overt and officious. It was this type of patrolling which, according to my interpreters in Danang and Hue, led to the extraordinary decisions to blanket any bad weather news in the early 1980s. Officials feared that media reporting of loss of lives and materials would reflect poorly upon them, and prevented such reporting. Others, using what they thought was a more international outlook, blanketed the news because they claimed 'enemies' of Vietnam outside would ridicule Vietnam for its losses.

Patrolling occurs within TV and radio stations. When, on 26 May 1992, there were local riots by Bhuddist monks in Hue, the ancient capital and spiritual centre of Vietnam, there were hurriedly called meetings of all senior journalists in Radio Vietnam ('Voice of Vietnam'). The journalists were ordered to ignore the reports. On 27 May after the BBC had broadcast news of the riots, Radio Vietnam Party censors ordered staff to hold off reporting, so that correspondents could mature their thoughts and prepare 'proper responses' to the 'falsehoods and distortions' being broadcast now by the BBC Foreign Service, the ABC's Radio Australia and the US World Service. These reports originating with Reuters and Agence France Press were buttressed by eye-witness accounts from foreign visitors to Hue on 26 May who were interviewed after leaving Vietnam. The chief editor and the Party representatives knew the conditions but continued, in what must be considered a censor's reflex action, to call these reports 'falsehoods' although there had not yet been had direct reports from VNA in Hue.

The story pieced together later said that On 24 May in the ancient capital of Hue - a city today still regarded as the cultural capital - Bhuddist monks from the Linh Mu pagoda went to the People's Committee office and staged a sit-in. They said that a man whose body was found on the temple grounds had burned himself to death. There had long been periodic groundswells of mistrust of the Party, so (according to one report) when the custodian monk from the temple was invited to ride back to the pagoda in a Committee car, it appeared to onlookers that police were arresting him. The monks outside the People's Committee building rioted, stopping then overturning the car and finally setting fire to it. This led to a wider outbreak of dissent against the Party by monks and to a lesser extend the youth and general public. The censors decided no news of these riots would be broadcast. Hue newspapers, Hue radio, Hue TV (a repeater station with a small segment for local news) were ordered not to report the incident. But Hue is today

again a popular tourist destination and one, at any one time, with two or three hundred foreign tourists, so the news soon got out. Despite almost every foreign radio broadcast carrying the news from May 25 to May 30, there was no response from Hanoi.

By 31 May the riots had become a 'public secret' especially in Hanoi, where foreigners arrived in hundreds daily, bringing with them newspapers like *The Bangkok Post*, and *The Straits Times*. On 31 May Radio Vietnam censors finally wrote a crude response which was at first translated into an English version by employees before being given to the News Editor. The report was then handed to foreign staff who professionally edited it. Before this professional editing the report read: "The chairman of the People's Committee of Hue city has dismissed the falsehoods and distortions broadcast by some radios on the so-called 'selfimmolation of a Bhuddist devout' in Hue and the ensuing disorder." There followed a reconstruction of events based entirely upon the VNA's interview with the chairman of the People's Committee, little of which agreed with previously broadcast radio reports. To those hearing the report for the first time the item would have been confusing and, to say the least, suspicious. It sounded just what it was, a belated cover-up.

On 7 June the censors released another report to the News Editor, the original which this author was not able to procure. The professionally edited report read: "Three men are in custody awaiting prosecution after a recent incident in Hue City in central Vietnam in which a government car was overturned and burned...the incident caused a major traffic block in Hue that lasted for several hours ... the dead man's brother has suggested that, with his mind in trouble his brother may have been incited into taking his own life to serve other people's purposes."

Foreign journalists, including the author, discussing the Hue riots in late May and early June with local journalists, pointed out that had Vietnamese journalists on the spot not been prevented from publishing the facts of the suicide and been allowed to interview both Bhuddists and Central Committee members there would have been little more to the report than a strong news story on 25 May. When the Party and Police stepped in and banned interviews and publications, and when Hanoi censors wrote their own clumsy 'news stories' which were little more than hackneyed disclaimers, the foreign press became deeply suspicious and the incident was blown out of all proportion.

In April 1994, the same people were in place in Radio Vietnam and the same level of censorship applied. Discussion of the Hue incident was banned. Patrolling of all news, especially the consistent reports of Bhuddist - Party clashes in central and southern Vietnam, continues.

One foreign journalist from Bangkok's *Nation* argued that at least Vietnam Radio had taken a step in the right direction by hiring foreign staff whose native language was English. Elaine Moore, a former member of the British Communist Party and one of the first foreigners to work in information services in Vietnam after World War Two, disagrees. In an interview in a Nguyen Du Street hostel in 1993 she told the author: "Censorship has changed very little. What has changed is that a much wider variety of news is allowed to be printed. Also, Vietnamese are allowed to talk to foreigners now and they are allowed to invite them home. I worked here for a year before I was invited home, even though I was a Communist Party member. If you were foreign, you were not trusted. Today, foreigners freely visit Vietnamese at home. That is great progress. But the censorship, underneath it all, remains essentially the same." The author had asked about 'checking' of her copy when working in the *Vietnam Courier* on any of her working periods in Hanoi in the early 'sixties': "I'm sorry to say they often tried 'correcting' my English. Nothing I wrote was ever allowed to go straight into publication. They made horrendous mistakes and alarming claims which were obviously not able to be substantiated. I was tremendously sympathetic, and they knew it. I am also well-liked, I am certain. Yet I could never convince them on what I considered many important points. It is not much different today (1993) but the atmosphere is more encouraging. At the end of it I am still close to many of my colleagues from that period."

2.3 Staffing of the Media

All chief editors and senior staff of major Vietnamese publications and television and radio stations are appointed directly by the Communist Party. There is no pretence or subterfuge attempted. No media experience, other than being able to read a newspaper, is necessary. Many semi-literates still occupy major publishing positions within Vietnam. To put the matter in perspective, however, one must agree that the percentage of Party appointees in other branches of Government who daily make decisions beyond their training is probably no different from those in the media.²²

By appointing someone loyal to the Party line (but perhaps unskilled) rather than another with skills, the Party accentuates its determination to retain firm control of the media and limit the reportorial activities of the staff.²³ Newspaper and publishing appointments also provide good booty for these Party men, who are often privately impoverished. They are able to take advantage of numerous invitations to join media delegations abroad or within the nation, attend social and diplomatic functions in their roles as editor (and guarantee, if necessary, to honour promises of publication) and they are able to choose junior staff and generally convert many opportunities.

More recently, as publications have begun taking in serious revenues from advertising, they are able to derive financial advantage. The publishers of the *Vietnam Investment Review*, for example, drive expensive automobiles on permanent loan from an advertiser (Mekong Jeeps) and the most popular newspapers are given tickets to sporting and entertainment functions, free meals at restaurants and cocktail parties. These people may have also been seen on National days at foreign embassies, which have quickly become important social events in Vietnam today.

The chief editor gets first choice, and may choose not to pass on any of these benefits to staff, although that would be a rare practice. The Vietnamese are largely a class-conscious society and importance of the trappings of success and influence should not be under-estimated, especially after so many years of deprivation and artificially-generated enthusiasm for 'equality' by the leaders. To generalise such can be dangerous, but there are many examples (especially in southern Vietnam) in daily media life which attest to these appointments to power being highly prized. Thus, the power to dispense largess to the staff enhances the editors' position.

Between 1988 and 1990 newsprint allotments were a great source of both control and wealth. Some newspapers and especially magazines existed only as shells, printing a few pages of text each month and their entire print run may have been 200 copies. Yet the Party's publishing division may have granted them sufficient newsprint for 25,000 copies monthly.

In this the appointed editors benefited. The chief editors would on-sell for private profit the unused newsprint to more successful publications. Thousands of dollars changed hands in these black market transactions with chief editors getting the lion's share. No one in that period questioned how a popular

magazines could sell 30,000 copies when their allotment of newsprint was sufficient for only 10,000. When *doi moi* policies began to be implemented the state began phasing out financial subsidies to the press, although the Party, the Army and the Foreign Office publications of *Nhan Dan*, *Saigon Giai Phong*, *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* and the *Vietnam Courier* were notable exceptions. In the case of the *Vietnam Courier*, described by its critics as "the most widely distributed, least read Vietnamese publication in history", there was considerable critical comment from other publishers who saw the *Courier* as a white elephant, playing no serious role in the modern world where government publications were considered, worldwide, as unreliable.

By April 1994, profits from the sale of newsprint had become a thing of the past. Successful publications could purchase cheap Chinese newsprint which had flooded the market during 1993. Along with general directions from Government (to all State Operated Enterprises, not just those concerned with media) that SOEs 'stand on their own feet' the newsprint subsidy question became irrelevant. Saigon *NewsReader* editor Hoang Ngoc Nguyen reported in March 1994, that very few publications were subsidised through newsprint, and although most still had free land, buildings and printing presses or access to that equipment, the 'erosion' had begun. For example, in Saigon the most popular newspaper *Tuoi Tre* (Youth), was in danger of losing its free-use of buildings and machinery (given to them when they were confiscated from the Catholic Church after the fall of Saigon in April 1975) although the Party soon found an alternative site close to the Foreign Office and the VNA southern headquarters in District 1.

The emergence of a small newsprint industry has also taken the value from trading in newsprint. Newsprint made in Vietnam provides nearly 50 per cent of the volume required but the quality is often deficient and the price a little above both Chinese and Russian newsprint; agents for the press import from China and Russia, the cheapest sources, then Indonesia and South Korea, with a little from Scandinavia.

This liberal market place has operated well for the publishers since 1993 but has put enormous pressure on the Vietnamese newsprint mills who cannot compete with Chinese or Russian newsprint on price, or with Indonesian, South Korean or Scandinavian newsprint on quality.

An employee of one of the biggest import-export companies in Hanoi, Tocintap, told the author in December 1993, that the government was showing common

sense in not protecting the Vietnamese newsprint mills. "Not because the Vietnamese are not trying to improve, but for practical reasons. Firstly, it would make it more difficult for importers like ourselves, and secondly it would lead to the Chinese taking advantage of the market prices. The Chinese newsprint is mostly smuggled into Vietnam. To penalise other sources like South Korea or Indonesia would lead to further dependence upon China, and that would be unwelcome."

Aspiring Party politicians also use the media for their own gains and try to gain advisory staff positions. Image enhancement is only a recent phenomenon (the current Prime Minister was the first of today's leaders to use the media effectively) but over the past decades almost every member of the Central Committee has at some time been involved in publishing ventures. The Party daily *Nhan Dan* is a favourite haunt of politicians. Political speeches (in their entirety) are paraded as 'news' and smaller newspapers are expected to follow suit. Staffs of Party newspapers have on-the-job work experience; they are often not trained journalists. Research, news writing, layout design or specialist writing like features is not required in these Party papers. They have no need to be popular (they are distributed almost free) and the Party has tight control where they feel they need it.

Staffing of radio stations is equally unprofessional and political. Where foreign language writers are needed, lay persons - unkindly called fellow travellers, such as teachers or academics based in Hanoi and needing extra money - are hired. Of the entire English language broadcasting staff of Radio Vietnam there is only one trained English speaking journalist, Terry Hartney, formerly of *The Australian*.²⁴ Television reporters are not normally Party members, nor are the cameramen or editing staff. But the heads of stations are all Party men and by Western standards entirely unsuited for the tasks. Saigon TV's chief director was a cameraman and soldier (often at the same time) with the Viet Cong. For more than three years the major content of his station's broadcasts was material supplied directly from Moscow. He preferred veteran soldiers for key staff.

Staffing choice has further ramifications. The chief editors insist on vetting invitations from foreign governments. They choose who on their staff is sufficiently politically safe to be given scholarships to train in journalism abroad and they often insist on accompanying any media delegation from Vietnam when invited abroad.

It may safely be said that previously the title 'chief editor' within Vietnam meant simply Party Watchdog. There have been some particularly successful publisher-editors in very recent times (1992 on) who have, through clever positioning of their publications in the market place and aggressive advertising policies, become rich. They pay only lip-service to the former Socialist policies, but are still careful never to raise contentious issues. Instead, they concentrate on training their staff to pick up gossip, write sports features and crime reports and other popular news items. One particular editor (who died in mid-1993) brought the lowly Police Gazette (*Cong An*) along so quickly it became the first paper in Vietnam to sell 100,000 copies. The staff were modestly talented writers, but they had good police contacts and got gory, inside stories of mayhem and murder, which the public flocked to the newsstands to read. *Cong An's* competitors have since narrowed the sales gaps by imitating its heart-beat, intimate reporting of the frailties of human nature, its compact direct style and focus on crime, sport and gossip. As usual, leadership in aggressive newspaper competition stemmed from the south. Pale imitations of zesty reporting have now begun to appear in the north.

2.4 Media Training

The Communist Party of Vietnam regards the training of journalists in Vietnam as solely their domain. The Party has voiced many placating platitudes down the years since the major policy change in 1987, but has never been willing to allow anyone but their most trusted and loyal media employees go abroad for training.²⁵ The Party was well prepared by 1989 for the scores of offers from foreign governments for their journalists to be trained overseas. In the early periods of the "Open Door" approach, 1988 to 1991, various government leaders on one hand told foreign journalists, overseas universities or foreign aid program managers, that journalists could 'like anyone else' be trained abroad. The Vietnamese Journalists Association, would process any submissions first, then those chosen would be handed on to the relevant authorities. But as the months then the years dragged on and submission after submission had been rejected or simply unanswered, it became clear the Party had never any intention of allowing this to happen. When, finally, young journalists from Hanoi were sent abroad they were chosen for their reliability and subservience. The examples were numerous: Reuters took two journalists for training in London (as part of the deal to allow Reuters to operate), Aidab financed one sub-editor from the *Vietnam News* into a

journalism course in Sydney. But the people chosen were desk re-write workers, not research oriented or even reportorial staff.

When the training of journalists abroad was first mentioned at the Round Table Conference in Ho Chi Minh City in January 1988 the representatives of the Vietnam News Agency said they had prepared a short list of journalists to be trained abroad. By 1992 this statement was seen to be just part of the overall propaganda ploy by the Party to get a better press at that conference. Those who studied abroad in media schools (India for example) were interpreters for the Foreign Ministry's Foreign Press Centre²⁶ and these trainees were headed for Foreign Office Information postings. There was worse to come - such as the refusal by the government to allow in-house or on-the-spot training in Western style journalism offered to numerous Hanoi and Saigon journalists. Finally, it was admitted in several quarters that the Party, through its Education Committee, agreed "the training of journalists has a very low priority" in the scheme of things. Accountants, surveyors, mining engineers, pharmacists, tourism specialists, were to be given priority. The training of journalists would be handled by Vietnam itself.

The journalists who did finally travel abroad for training were to be trained in the English language, then return. The training of press centre interpreters continued, blurring the argument somewhat. In reality, they were being trained 'to manage' the Western press, as Information Officers for the Vietnam government, not to train in journalism.

The author is a founding member of the Board of Trustees which manages the Indo-China Media Memorial Foundation (IMMF) founded and now financed internationally to train Vietnamese journalists and to establish a journalism School at the University of Hue.

The IMMF was at first given approval to erect a monument to all journalists who lost their lives in the various Indo-China wars since World War II. (That, of course, covered Cambodia and Laos, as well). A site within the former Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) was chosen in 1990 and a formal tree-planting ceremony took place. A few months later the Vietnam Journalists Association, through the Fatherland Front, said no memorial could be erected because it would contain the names of "traitors and state enemies, members of the former Southern regime", meaning Saigon journalists.

The IMMF, unwilling to erect a memorial that would not bear the names of Vietnamese journalists working for either Western media or their own newspapers in former South Vietnam, then concentrated on the educational aspect of the Trust. The VJA and Ministry of Education said Hanoi would allow such a school but would choose the lecturers and use the funds in Hanoi, not in Hue. The IMMF responded that Hue had been chosen as a half-way point and that all lecturers would be volunteers. The IMMF could not get volunteers if the curriculum came under Party control and only those students nominated by the Ministry. The IMMF, now (1994) cashed up, operates from Bangkok, takes the approach that their modestly ambitious plan - widely embraced by every non-Party Vietnamese journalist canvassed - must be shelved until many of the present leaders retire.

When, in 1988 at the Round Table Conference, the subject of training journalists first arose, the foreign correspondents present, including the author, were largely suggesting courses of general education. Western Journalism Schools in general prepare journalists for entry into newspapers, but do not train students to be journalists, at least as working journalists know journalism. The real training is done on the job, in house, and the training done by accompanying senior journalists and photographers on genuine assignments. Therefore, before on-the-job experience, a general, broad education is necessary.

The subject had arisen when it became clear local journalists attending the conference had so little exposure to the outside world that one, for example, did not know of the existence of South Korea, thinking Kim Il Sung's Korea to be the only Korea. Others confidently told us Cuba was the most powerful nation in Central and Southern America and Castro's revolution would "any day now" lead to the downfall of the United States as we knew it. There were even more extraordinary examples, and their knowledge of what had happened during the Vietnam war was at best, warped and incomplete.²⁷ The matter of training journalists to use modern technology also arose. When foreign journalists arrived with portable word processors, voice-activated tape recorders and auto-focus cameras, the Vietnamese 'journalists' were in awe. However, it soon became obvious that many who had been given media titles were in fact Party representatives with no training, had never used even simple technology and in many cases could not use a typewriter. Many of them spoke Russian and stayed close to the Tass, Pravda and Socialist countries' representatives, feeling comfortable in that milieu because their only foreign experience had been either

as a trainee in Socialist countries or as friends with the Socialist-bloc visitors, and they had long regarded the Western journalists as enemies.

The accent on control rather than training manifests itself also in what may be loosely termed 'editorial room architecture.' Most newspapers published in Vietnam today have strict separation of editorial and machinery rooms. The author helped layout a new newsroom for *The Vietnam News* in 1993. One of the central themes to the refurbishing was to isolate the technicians' room.²⁸ A small room containing old IBM computers using pirated software on word processing and layout, was the heart of the office. The reporters either translate news from other languages into Vietnamese or local news into English. There is normally little provision in editorial plans for journalists to go out and get stories for themselves. In the case of *The Vietnam News* they were fortunate enough to have an editor with international training, but most do not. In other words, getting the news from the VNA is sufficient.

When the *Vietnam Investment Review* was founded in 1990 (an Australian initiative) the author, when attending the launch-day ceremonies, was told a wide range of training initiatives had been approved for local staff. Four years later the *VIR* has been reduced to a *sycophantic* propaganda publication for the State Foreign Investment Board (SCCI) and staffed by itinerant semi-trained Westerners, hired for their ability to re-write local translations (into technical English) done by Vietnamese from Vietnamese language speeches or articles carried by the vernacular press.²⁹

In the four years of the *VIR*'s existence only one Vietnamese journalist - Nguyen Van Binh - has been sent abroad for training and that to the Institute for International Education in New York, funded by the Freedom Forum, a foundation sponsored by Garnett Publishing. Van Binh went abroad in 1993, three years after the paper opened. Yet at the launching of the publication both the founding Publisher, former *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter Nick Mountstephen, and a representative of the State Committee for Investment and Cooperation (SCCI), a partner in the publication, claimed schemes for training Vietnamese journalists in the West were among the most important foundation articles of the contract. Perhaps local journalists may yet be allowed to go abroad for practical training. Queensland film producer Evan Ham reported Consolidated Press had in Hanoi in May bought out the 50 per cent foreign interest in the *Vietnam Investment Review*.

In Hanoi in August 1988 the Vietnam Journalists Association, a branch of the Fatherland Front and directly under the control of the Party, said it expected invitations to its members from the Australian Journalists Association and journalists' unions in the Western world. But those who went abroad on invitation from foreign journalism schools and journalists' associations in the first years were Party cadres and media administrators. They had known even in 1988 who would be sent abroad first. They would be veterans who had not had the opportunity to learn English because they had been in the revolution. Others, who would specialise as technicians and operate computers, were chosen for their future use as technicians, not journalists.

At the time there were no computers being used in newspaper offices in Vietnam. The first word processor in the Foreign Press Centre was a Brother WPIOO which the author supplied in lieu of payments for services rendered by the Centre, in 1989. At the launch of the *Vietnam Investment Review* several Vietnam Journalists Association representatives were questioned on what training they thought was needed. One official said he himself was not a journalist and all he knew about the functioning of news offices came from a Swedish delegation who had said their newspapers were computerised. He assumed, therefore, that Vietnamese journalists experience on word processors was all that was involved in training. In those days there was a strange belief that word processors would partly write the stories and that was why Western journalists were able to write so well and so quickly.

Between 1987 and Tet (10 February) of 1994 there have been no serious changes or softening of attitudes on the Communist Party of Vietnam's tight control on the training and general education of journalists. There is an occasional hint that favouritism like nominating friends who need a trip abroad plays a part in this policy of restricting training to the very young or very old. By basically agreeing to English training courses and some exposure to the West, and blocking any on-the-job training, which is where the real training of journalists is done, the Vietnamese have maintained a fairly tight control. The Party, in what it hoped would deflect growing criticism of this policy in 1993 took the astonishing (and almost ludicrous) step of inviting a German School of Journalism team from Munich to come to Hanoi (on German government grants) to train Vietnamese in the writing of English news! No native-speaking English journalists, let alone academics or IMMF correspondents based in Bangkok could be trusted with the task, it seems.

There is strong evidence that controls are enforced where training abroad is concerned, but less easily enforced in big cities like Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Although the Party attempts through its system of guides to keep foreign journalists clear of the local journalists, these days there is the certainty of some inter-mingling because so many foreign companies call general press conferences. Foreign journalists also covertly employ local journalists to translate documents for them or do minor research tasks, giving local journalists an insight into the news gathering techniques of the international media, like *The Economist*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Le Monde* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, which are just some of the publications employing local journalists on a casual basis. The publisher of the *Saigon News Reader*, Hoang Ngoc Nguyen, is adamant, however, that students of the Vietnam press should be very aware of the differences between the Saigon Press³⁰ and the Hanoi Press. In an interview on 15 March 1994, he re-stated a position he had held since early 1987: "Hanoi is conservative. Hanoi now follows Saigon's lead in all forms of publishing, just as it took on the South's economic policies after it was clear Socialism was not working. The press in Saigon is competitive, aggressive, and within reason, challenging. Hanoi's press is quite subservient in comparison."

2.5 Media Material Supplies

Newsprint, especially, was the control-material for the Communist Party of Vietnam until mid-1992. Newsprint may now be purchased on the free market, but there was a time when it was used to control publications and to reward loyalty, by giving allotments of subsidised newsprint purchased by the Government and passed on at a subsidised price. In the period before the collapse of the USSR, Soviet made newsprint was almost the only newsprint available. In general the newsprint was 'free' in the sense that it was never costed out to the newspapers. The entire publishing industry was controlled along Soviet lines. There was no advertising, therefore no revenue. The cost of the newspapers was nominal and in the case of the Party paper, *Nhan Dan*, delivered free. There was little room for profiteering and no need to worry about industry balance sheets. There is considerably more freedom these days, and a lot more accounting. Newspapers are expected to purchase their own paper. There is now one Vietnamese newsprint factory (built with Swedish help) which produces good B-grade quality newsprint³¹ which meets almost 50 per cent of the current demand. The remainder of the newsprint needed is imported. The most popular

is Chinese newsprint, smuggled in overland from China. Its quality is good, the price often below the local newsprint.

For special purpose paper, like magazines, other foreign mills are approached. The author was engaged by marketing manager Dinh Thi Nghia of the state trading company (Tocintap) in Hanoi in 1992 to survey the Indonesian newsprint market. Despite there being a glut of newsprint in Indonesia at the time, even the depressed prices quoted by the Indonesian producers were still too high for Vietnamese producers, and the plan was dropped. To free themselves of the need to apply to government authorities for newsprint was in early 1992 a costly form of independence. Within a year that had changed. By late 1993 many publications, especially in Ho Chi Minh City, had succeeded in raising solid revenues from advertising a relatively new feature of the Vietnamese press - and they could afford the Indonesian prices. Today, imported Indonesian newsprint is very popular. Although more expensive than Chinese newsprint, it is more reliable for Rotary press use and does not easily snap when the presses are run at high speeds.³² All other forms of machinery, especially computers for word processing, and good bond paper for print-outs of hard copy, remains expensive but easy to acquire. Control of the press through materials is on the wane.

2.6 Media Access to Information

Access to information for most of the foreign media in Vietnam remains one of the main barriers to in-depth, accurate coverage. There are few local publications which provide the background information normally needed; municipalities do not print their own services guide, or have booklets listing their members, structure, or activities. The Government has no public relations arm other than the Foreign Press Centre of Hanoi, to service journalists' needs. By far the best news publication in all Vietnam is the *Saigon News Reader*, which is the daily bible for all news agencies in Hanoi and which for foreign businessmen provides an unparalleled breadth of coverage of general news and specialist articles without which they would largely be in the dark. True, 80 per cent of the articles are direct translations from the vernacular press, but it is the editing and in the choice of the articles by its very experienced and accomplished editor Hoang Ngoc Nguyen, a former Saigon Post writer before the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975.

The author has worked with Hoang Ngoc Nguyen and his able staff for more, than four years. Nguyen was founding chief of staff for the *Vietnam Investment Review*, then founder of the *NewsReader*. Many of Nguyen's colleagues have said that when ghost writing for the present prime minister Vo Van Kiet - when Kiet was a deputy premier - Nguyen was first to popularise the word 'renovation' when translating *doi moi*.

But the *NewsReader* is not strictly part of the Vietnam press, although it is published daily and distributed at home and abroad. At US\$25 monthly it is a specialist publication and not produced in great numbers. It is part of the service to the business community and acts as a consultancy aid to foreign investors. Whilst the *NewsReader* staff has no difficulty gaining access to the general business community, it is very privileged.

The author has been employed as a consultant by international business since 1989 and in that time has taken in representatives or done research work alone in Vietnam for sixty-one companies. Almost all of these companies wanted the type of information normally available from the daily or specialist press in their home countries. In Vietnam, because the press dealt largely with political or social matters, and the business publications produced poorly researched and non-specific information, further research was always necessary. It took, for example, two weeks to locate a manufacturer of a specific type of marine rope because, among other things, no industry publication was available and the product of the factory in western Ho Chi Minh City was kept secret.

Other rope manufacturers repeatedly claimed to our client that a rope which had been manufactured since 1988 did not exist in that city. They were genuinely surprised when we produced the product. No official publication in either Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City had any record of this manufacturer.

There are other serious failures or misinformation. Local journalists writing a survey of industrial production largely use guesswork, or employ local officials who guess the answers. Provincial newspapers carry glorified reports of local 'opportunities' in the hope of attracting investment, and use statistics loosely. These are just some of the problems visiting media encounter. For a local journalist to query official statistics is a fairly serious matter. It may not lead to dismissal, but it could certainly lead to the individual being cautioned or sidelined, although in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City they could probably get away with it. The so-called 'scoops' in unearthing corruption - especially in Ho Chi

Minh City - are almost always based on information leaked to the press deliberately by Party officials wishing to put pressure on and embarrass certain employees, especially if they are corrupt, before official action is taken. By the time the action is taken there is a general feeling the Party should come along and save the day and clean up the company. According to senior and very experienced Ho Chi Minh journalists who worked as reporters long before the fall of Saigon, no journalist on a Party newspaper would dare act independently.

The above are illustrations of difficulty in access. The journalists are officially encouraged to 'expose' the corruptors, but in fact they are not given access to the sort of government information files or allegedly public records that would lead to genuine exposés. So, in reality, for the local media the access difficulties are often as bad as they are for visiting foreign journalists. They certainly know much more than any foreign journalist, but they are not able to pursue investigations freely, let alone publish.

Getting to foreign sources (very important in these days when so many joint venture companies are formed between local and foreign companies) is also not easy. Invitations to press conferences are sometimes the only means of discovering what is happening in their own city. (There is no radio news as the West knows it; headlines and main bulletins are taken up by official announcements). The invitations to major press conferences go to those news editors considered by the Party to be reliable. A curious, energetic reporter asking too many difficult questions will soon find - as many did in 1993 - he or she is quietly dropped from the invitation list.

There are no public information sections - at least none which function efficiently - no public relations departments within Ministries which answer every day questions. In general, therefore, getting reliable information in Vietnam is a real test and one which, for example, very few foreign (Western or other) news writers pass, so they become travelling feature writers, using soft facts and softly focussed articles well padded out with photographs.

The *Vietnam Investment Review's* Western staff is an excellent example. The *VIR* reporters have not, since the paper's inception, broken any real news other than interviews with foreign businessmen who are usually desperate to see their own and their companies names in print, hoping for local leverage. The *VIR* publishes translations of articles from the vernacular press or reports given to them by state bodies. Only very experienced staff reporters for the *Far Eastern Economic*

Review, or the resident news agency staffer, for example, are able to put together reasonable reports on Vietnam. Itinerant writers rarely succeed in serving their readers well for they have not sufficient time to build up a network of reliable contacts, or indeed even have time to learn how to sift the guesswork from the genuine information. The type of brief, low-budget visits favoured by the *Melbourne Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *West Australian*, and US and UK publications, almost always result in insipid, shallow or inaccurate reports containing much that is guesswork. In 1989 the author published an article describing a bus trip overland from Long An province to Phnom Penh, a visit to Angkor Wat and ferrying across the Mekong. In 1992, a visiting Sydney journalist sent a report (which was published) claiming she was the first Westerner since the advent of Pol Pot to travel the same road. When the Hanoi Press Centre approached her on the claim, she defended the report saying a guide had told her! London's *Sunday Mail* sent a feature writer into Ho Chi Minh City to secretly interview a soldier. Because there were no street maps of the city (and because he could not understand that Saigon is used to identify the CBD of Ho Chi Minh City, and because there were no municipal directories to help with the particular suburban address he needed), he wasted his time for several days, (He was finally advised by the Foreign Office to call me in Perth and in a US\$200 telephone call I directed a reporter I had never met to his destination, street-by-street, house by house). The Vietnamese authorities did not think it unusual that a foreigner would know something they did not. In my consulting and research work I have often tracked down raw materials which Vietnamese officials have told me do not exist in the country. When the EEC (European Economic Community) office publishes papers on the economy the papers are often used as reference material by the local press.

These reports are often highlighted as news, despite the fact that the authors are foreigners and are often extrapolating or making intelligent guesses. What hope then can an inexperienced, visiting, journalist who speaks no Vietnamese or French, ever have other than do a few photo assignments or rewrite local English language reports?

To ease the pain for the local journalists, the Government has used a 'carrot and stick' approach to managing the local media. Through scholarships, junkets with leading ministers, inter and intrastate trips and invitations to red carpet ceremonies, the Party keeps most journalists modestly satisfied. For special friends there are scholarships, training programs or special visits abroad. On the other hand recalcitrants are left at home, not a pleasant thought for ambitious

journalists in this boom period. There are mitigating circumstances, or balances, to all the above claims. The reality in news gathering is that most Vietnamese functionaries themselves are untrained in seeking out information, and unwilling to initiate the work, a default to the past where the Party made it clear that the work of information gathering was the Party's domain. If a Party leader wanted to know something he sent a team of cadres who would ask the questions. The government employees subjected to questioning, and spoke only when ordered.

A good example reported to this author was so-called 'research' by Hanoi cadres on quotas of Soviet-designed electric fans from a factory in Hai Duong, the capital of Hai Hung province. The author's source, by then a translator for the Chairman of the People's Committee, had been present in 1986 when the 'research' was done. The cadres created fear when they visited, prompted answers to their questions, and reported the factory to be running well. In fact, the factory had been almost at a standstill for twelve months because most of the factory's lathes had long ago broken down, needing spare parts which never arrived. The parts had still not arrived by 1990, when this author, working as a consultant, brought Telecom Australia to the Hai Duong factory for an inspection. Hanoi thought the factory was working at full capacity; the locals knew different. So unless the visiting writers are particularly knowledgeable they travel through Vietnam, led by amiable, untrained and often lazy translators who find it comfortable to skim the surface, not translating any difficult questions and frankly not caring much.

More frequently, Party officials still rule their local information empires at regional levels with an iron fist, wishing to extract the maximum propaganda result from any event which would normally attract the media. The situation is not unlike politicians in the West posturing before the media on every trivial occasion. There is one big difference. If the coverage is not to their liking the Western politician can do very little about it, whereas in Vietnam the Party can ensure before publication that every little paragraph is going to be to their liking.

The very important question of Self-Censorship is one which needs to be dealt with at length elsewhere, but it also affects access. Journalists who have learned the fine art of Self-Censorship are easily the most influential in Vietnam today. So adept are they that they are often able to help out ambitious politicians during press conferences by telling them which segments should be on the record and which should not be! These experienced campaigners, whilst almost always poor writers, are the survivors in Vietnam's media world. They 'float' to the top - that

is to say they do nothing but print or say what they are told -and today they head up TV and radio stations, or are rewarded with their own small journals when they retire. One notable example in the southern media is Pham Khac, a Party cameraman during the war who was appointed to the top post in Ho Chi Minh City's only TV station. Khac's war record seemed sufficient to have him chosen ahead of many others with more technical and managerial training, a matter that was frequently commented upon whenever the station began broadcasting its evening programs of Soviet news and Mexican soap operas, Cuban folk dancing, children's Patriotic Poetry Reading contests and other material which the local population found useful only as a butt for jokes or ridicule. A typical evening program included a soap opera from Moscow, news which was comprised coverage of meetings of uniformed USSR politicians and military leaders, and for light relief there were stories from snowfields. Only one news segment was included for the Vietnamese audience, despite there being so many local events (and the equipment to film and put them to air) available.

With Khac's influence and with so many eager young TV reporters at his disposal any News Director of HCM-TV could have put together a strong news bulletin every evening. But Khac and many others of his era are products of a fading era when no negative aspect of their society could ever be discussed openly, no alternative thoughts than those sanctioned by the Party were voiced, and no criticism of Socialist Comrades abroad were ever voiced. That, sadly, included Pol Pot, in the years of his worst excesses. The USSR, Cuba, China, were all above criticism and the Western nations were ridiculed and became the butt of the Party's public tirades for two decades. When the time came for breaking clear of these mental straight jackets, the Party appointees were largely unable to seize the opportunities.

2.7 Distribution of Media Products

Aside from the Communist Party, the VNA and the Armed Forces networks there is no 'national network' which carries information throughout Vietnam. There are few workable national commercial networks (the development of private enterprise basically forbidden from 1975) for even the distribution of foodstuffs or cottage industry products. The one inescapable conclusion drawn during the author's first years in 'new' Vietnam (post-1987) was that no product, media product like a news item, a radio or television report, or even foodstuffs or

manufactured products, could be distributed nationally unless through the Party or the Army. The Party chose to confine its 'media products' to the VNA, whose output was strictly censored in Hanoi.

Book publishers even today have no other distribution system outside the state-owned company Sinusaba, which handles the *Nhan Dan* (Party Daily), among others. The Party is able to have full control of publications through the distribution network as a back-up to its licensing law, which allowed a book to be published in the first place. An officer of the Ho Chi Minh City Chamber of Commerce reported to the author in mid-1993 that she was no longer able to get a book I had requested because it had been "suddenly withdrawn by the distributor." The publication (I was later told) contained a few harmless comments warning foreign investors to seek out private companies rather than SOE's (State Owned Enterprises) because the SOEs were being culled and few had a long-term future, and the censors felt this was something foreign investors should not be told, despite the subject being mentioned in almost every conference on foreign investment held since 1990.

Given this background, to say that newspaper or book distribution is difficult within Vietnam is to understate the situation. Setting aside the political history following the ascendancy of the Communist Party in North Vietnam in 1954 and South Vietnam in 1975, roads, rail and telegraphic networks have never been of a high standard. The meagre networks inherited from the French colonial periods were not the sort of foundations which an emerging nation could use with confidence. Indeed, one of the main aims of the Communist Party during the Vietnam war was to destroy as many of the communications facilities of the South Vietnam Government as they could. When it came time for rebuilding those facilities, after the Fall of Saigon in April 1975, what has recently been called a 'sinister policy' of non-development of the south took place.

Saigon and all networks to it, and Danang and Nha Trang and Hue, were deliberately left without funds to repair or redevelop. The author does not totally subscribe to this theory, but notes there has been much speculation, especially in the south, that this policy was a 'copycat' of Mao's attitude in the 1950s towards Shanghai, which was left to fester as a form of punishment for its non-Communist attitudes. Malaysia and even Indonesia inherited better railway and road systems and a tradition of national publications. The many illegal newspapers published in Saigon, Danang and Hanoi between the World Wars were only distributed locally, as were the French Colonial administration

newspapers. Perhaps more to the point is the Communist Party's reluctance in any part of its history to share information with the people, or to let information travel even to its own regional centres.

In a mock-up test of how quickly information could have travelled in 1982 the author with help from the Hanoi Foreign Press Centre staff, reconstructed as far as possible a 'model' of 1982 conditions in a pottery village on the south bank of the Red River (Hanoi is on the north bank, 20 kms from this village) to see how long news of pottery prices or political gossip would have taken to get to or back from Hanoi and Danang. Called the Pottery Village, its products have been famous throughout northern Vietnam for most of this century due to a certain process and the quality of the clay as well as the artisans. The pottery travelled all over Vietnam during the Colonial period and was popular as far south as Saigon. Villagers placed Danang as the southern limit, objecting to our introduction of Saigon into the test. "That was over the horizon as far as we were concerned. None of our pottery could ever have reached there during this period after reunification."

No one wished to even guess the number of times ID documents had to be produced, with extra papers attached as each hamlet was traversed, how many times petty Party 'gatekeepers' on small roads had to be bribed. The result was that it took nearly six months for the pottery to do the journey to Danang and for the information on prices to return. Not that the original carriers ever got to Danang. They were rarely allowed beyond their hamlets. A human relay system was used for that. "According to prices in Danang we were the richest village in all Vietnam," said the director of the Blue Pottery factory in the village. The villagers added: "That's what they thought, anyway, because our pottery was so highly priced. But in fact we were as poor as shiny rocks; ninety percent of the final price was the costs of getting it to Danang."

This network of barriers the Party established throughout Vietnam had ramifications well into the 1990s, and is proving a stumbling block for foreign business in Vietnam today, as hamlet or regional Party interests take precedence over agreements signed in Hanoi, for example. The situation today is nowhere near as difficult as during the 1980s, and it would be wrong to stress this factor when other major problems like the absence of roads, telecommunications and other infrastructure are more important hindrances. There are also 'ways around the problem' (as the Vietnamese saying goes) however major news organisations could not afford to take risks and bypass censors or distribution control, but a

great deal of initiative was shown in smaller organisations, My own book, *Thoat Khoi Tu Than*, was considered too small for Sinusaba to send to central and southern Vietnam from the Hanoi Cultural Publishing House. The author's employees 'found another way' without attracting attention. Five hundred books were shipped by train as part of a shipment of Laotian plaster of Paris powder and distributed by cycle around Ho Chi Minh City, all for US \$5.

Nonetheless, distribution remains an immense problem, especially for non-city dwellers, which means almost ninety per cent of Vietnam's eighty million people. Newspapers, books, films, magazines, specialist publications and any other printed matter 'seep' along the poorly made lesser roads into the hamlets, dwindling to a trickle more than fifty kms from any major centre, and worse, becoming more expensive as they get further from Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh or Danang, the main publishing centres. Until major infrastructure is re-established in southern Vietnam to somewhere near the level it was in 1970, and built to this level in the north, distribution will always be a great difficulty and one which will stunt the development of a strong press. Until then, readership will remain narrow and genuine competition restricted and people living in the countryside will be denied access to a broad range of publications. This is a very real problem.

Already many so-called 'provincial newspapers' are not only written and printed in Ho Chi Minh City but are also distributed and sold there, too, with very few of the copies being sold in the alleged province of origin. This was probably an accidental development but there is little doubt the costs and red tape involved in transporting the newspapers back to Danang or Nha Trang were part of the problem.

Road journeys are becoming increasing costly since the introduction of more than two million motorcycles and hundreds of thousands of light automobiles onto roads which have not been properly maintained for thirty years.

Major arteries, like the roads from Ho Chi Minh City to Danang, Hanoi to Haiphong, should be the highways which carry both media's raw materials (paper, ink, machinery) and products (books, newspapers, magazines) in swift, safe journeys with very small unit costs. This is not so. Although those two roads are among the busiest in Southeast Asia, they are dogged with traffic 24 hours of the day, they are dangerous and relatively expensive to traverse. Any sealed suburban street or country road in any Australian state is superior to these broken

roads. The alternative to physically transporting media products is transmitting them through the air waves. *The Vietnam News* is published in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City by transmitting the final pages by cable, and the *Vietnam News Agency* of course, sends all its transmissions via telephone. And whilst foreign communications companies are currently upgrading the inter-city lines all over Vietnam and data-package and fax-only lines are being installed, they will require costly equipment at both ends of these cables. There is also a doubt abroad that there will be any lines left available for commercial use after government departments get their quotas.

There is an alarming as yet unacknowledged drift of senior public servants to Ho Chi Minh City which is swelling government department ranks. While State Owned Enterprises are on the wane, mainstream government departments ranks are swelling.

In all Vietnam's cities the road traffic problems, brought on rapidly by the importation (and smuggling) of road vehicles without new roads or highways or road widening being introduced, has set Ho Chi Minh City and especially the Saigon sector - the CBD - on the usual Asian course of continuous traffic chaos. In Hanoi the traffic congestion increased so rapidly that between Tet of 1993 and Tet of 1994 traffic police on daytime duty increased from one (on the corner of Ngo Kien and Trang Tien streets) to at least twenty, two on all major intersections.

There has also been heavier use of telephone and fax lines for inner and inter-city communications. Where before one might neglect the telephone in favour of a short bicycle ride and a discussion (a common practice in the 1988-1992 years) now the traffic prohibits quick inner-city journeys and the demand for more telephone and fax lines is today very strong. Media access to new telephone lines in the future will be very difficult for all except those most favoured by government. Considering all of the above practical difficulties, added to censorship, it is not surprising that distribution of media products ranks as a significant restriction to growth for medium to large publishers.

2.8 Radio and TV Frequency Controls

The air waves are controlled by the armed forces. There are times when this does not appear so. In these times it seems Vietnam is relaxing both its vigilance and

control of the air waves. But this is not the case, say senior media personnel, foreign investors and airline executives, who have to deal month by month with airwaves problems. When the words 'national' and 'security' are used together, even the most hardened of media people, including the Party editors, figuratively dive for cover. This expression, "in the interests of national security," is one which strikes fear into their hearts, albeit that it is used far less frequently these days than in 1988, and certainly before 1978, or 1968.

The print media personnel rarely hear it, but radio and television personnel are still in awe of the expression as are foreign investors who suddenly come across extraordinary difficulties when (for example) putting in a radio-controlled ambulance system with a broadcast radius of just fifty kilometres to cover Hanoi and Hai Duong. In 1991 this author advised a publicly listed communications company on a Joint Venture in Hanoi which required a pilot project to be established, testing a two-way radio between the Hanoi Polytechnic and a 4WD ambulance roving over Hanoi. Both Vietnamese and Australian executives experienced months of delays, intense questioning by the military, abrupt cessation of discussions and long silences, a process which made the installation of Hanoi's Peoples' Fire Brigade radio network nearly impossible. The Peoples' Committee of Hanoi, normally a big player in Hanoi Joint-Venture operations, was powerless.

The problem in developing radio networks within Vietnam seems to stem directly from the Armed Forces' fear of foreign interests sharing air waves. Perhaps they fear Vietnamese civilian stations will crowd the air waves, which they have traditionally controlled, and somehow the security of the nation will be in peril. There is, therefore, an extreme reluctance for small Vietnamese companies, alone or in tandem with foreign companies, to try out Vietnam's new investment laws and establish independent news stations. So the public gets the People's Broadcasting Stations and nothing else. They get broadcasting when the State says they can receive (radio or television) and as noted above, they get largely what the State determines they should get. Every so often administrators are reminded - perhaps during a security exercise - that any slip into what may be loosely terms 'liberalism' or 'free thinking' is very easily dealt with. The stations may be shut down in a matter of minutes.

In 1971, to avoid US bombing raids, Vietnam Radio moved its radio operations and transmitter north across the China border for more than one year. The staff was sworn to secrecy. One of the key announcers so sworn, but who twenty years

later forgot that oath, was Madame Ngo, the famous “Hanoi Hannah” of the Vietnam war air waves. During one of this author's several social meetings with “Hannah” in Saigon she let it slip that she broadcast for more than one year from inside China. One of her colleagues said to me: “Please don't publish this. Not only are we embarrassed, but the military is fanatical about control of the airwaves.” Even in 1993 when Australian journalist Terry Hartney - himself a Vietnam Radio editor - wrote in *The Vietnam News* of the move into China, the mention of it was not appreciated, although for a mixture of reasons, not all of them concerned with airwaves control.

Negotiations with Australia's OTC Telecom consortium in Vietnam (Telstra) often bogged down on the matter of frequencies. One executive said the use of mobile telephones during 1991 on a trial basis in Saigon (the CBD of Ho Chi Minh city) brought ‘loud roars of disapproval’ from the military sector. By 1994 mobile telephones had become commonplace in Saigon and their use may soon be extended beyond the CBD to greater Ho Chi Minh city and with relays down to Vung Tau and Can Tho.

There is some hope that the paranoia over the use of new frequencies has subsided, but that does not mean the control of the public radio and TV frequencies is still not firmly in the hands of the military, as distinct from the civilian powers whose task it is to administer national broadcasting. More than any other impediment to free radio broadcasting, access to radio and TV frequencies will be the most difficult to overcome. This is the view of executives who have worked in telecommunications in Vietnam since 1988. The former manager of OTC Telecom operations in Hanoi, Robert Wicks, told the author in 1993: “The hardware for a new radio station is today very expensive, but the way conditions are changing here that will not be the problem by 1995.” The problem in 1995 will be the same one we have encountered and that is access to frequencies. This is sacred territory for the military. “I even say there is not a hint of corruption in these difficulties, but instead a plague of paranoia,” said the Alcatel (France) spokesman in a combined interview with US non-official representative for AT&T and the author at the opening of the OTC-Telecom Australia ground station in Hanoi, September 1993. One is forced to the conclusion that radio news or even entertainment broadcasting networks will be a very long time developing in Vietnam, amounting to another restriction on both media and training and consumer awareness of the possibilities of freer information exchanges.

3. Summary

When Vietnam's Communist Party leaders, Secretary-General Nguyen Van Linh and his Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach, faced the international press for the first international press conference on Vietnam's soil since the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975, a great deal was expected of them, and both men were acutely aware of those expectations. As non-Socialist South East Asian nations figuratively breathed a sigh of relief that Vietnam was, like the Soviet Union, finally coming to its senses and dealing with realities, and not aggressive rhetoric. Further afield, in the United States, in Europe and Japan, Vietnam's decision to normalise relations, to show itself willing to trade on a broad basis and seek international advice on economic reconstruction, was cautiously received, but welcomed.

For those outside who were professionally or academically interested in the welfare and immediate future of the Indo-Chinese media, Vietnam became of special interest. There had been, before the fall of Saigon and especially between 1960 and 1970, a flourishing free media. There was still in place a large community of trained writers and broadcasters, technicians and cameramen, who although now aged, could either train up to international levels or be capable of training other Vietnamese staff.

For those in the media in the sectors north of Hue, whose population had seen only two forms of government, a French-Colonial and a centrally-run Socialist government, there now seemed an opportunity to graduate from the oppressive Stalinist-style press, run by a narrowly focused government. The northern press was dominated for decades by the Communist Party. Not only dominated, but founded, funded, censored, indoctrinated, disciplined and rewarded by the Party. It was a total Party effort and any variations to the banners, or writing styles, or themes in content, arose from their historic origins and did not in any case alter their focus or the tone of the commands given them by the Party. The task of the Press was to foster Socialism, to educate people into building Socialist Vietnam. It was against this background, in the months following the Round Table Conference, that Western newspaper and television stations began reporting

Vietnam again and dealing with Vietnamese journalists either as interpreters, general helpers, researchers or just friends. The new government saw the Western press reporters as their salvation, just as their political leaders had seen them in the hottest years of the Vietnam war. Despite their inability to deal with urgent demands for interpreters, travel permits, decent accommodation and communications, they welcomed the foreign press and the press returned that compliment.

There were no expressions, as far as this author could detect, of 'holier than thou' attitudes by visiting foreign journalists who quickly discovered local journalists had almost no freedoms, worked in unhealthy and filthy offices, used machinery long discarded as junk by modern offices, and perhaps worst of all had so little income that their personal and family lives were tinged by a private desperation. Indeed, if there were hints of emotive reactions from foreign colleagues it was one of overpowering sympathy. Despite the harsh working conditions, there was among the Vietnamese journalists, an air of general optimism during those early years and the scent of hope for many individuals whose desperate desire it was to get abroad. They wanted to be trained in English, to catch up with modern media technologies, and circulate in press circles as representatives of a newly emerged South East Asian nation taking its rightful place in the world.

Those involved directly or with ambitions in publishing, wished for a set of new press guidelines, the freedom to launch their own publications in their own niche markets, and to operate in Vietnam's new 'market driven economy' to raise capital and compete in an exciting new media environment. They also wished to syndicate to the foreign press, or represent them. Students with media ambitions wished to win their way into foreign news agencies, or become stringers for international newspapers. Outside the media arena, a lot of Vietnam's expectations quickly came true in the immediate years after 1988. Vietnam abandoned the strictly Socialist-style, Hanoi-directed economy which had dearly failed. It had dragged Vietnam down to a level that nations like Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand had left behind them many decades earlier.

Month by month in those six years from Tet 1988 to Tet 1994, healthy changes could be seen. The economy was free to flourish. The building industry boomed, hotels were quickly filled with dollar-paying clients, tourism grew from a trickle to a steady stream, more than one million new Motorcycles and two hundred thousand automobiles went on to the roads, houses were renovated, national trust buildings restored and schools began modernising.

Ordinary people were at last free to buy new medicines and better food, free to wear better quality and more colourful clothing. Free at last to buy footwear, electrical appliances, school workbooks, good batteries, hand-held computers, a camera, and even have photographs developed and printed at a reasonable cost. Free to start up restaurants, or attend them. Restaurants and street cafes became more popular than in the headiest days before 1975. Visiting sports teams, music and dance troupes all added to the heady mix Vietnamese called modernisation and progress.

For the press however, no such luck. No such heady freedoms.

There were some immediate cosmetic changes in the press world. In the first twenty months to August 1989, before the Party decided to return to the old ways of strictly controlling both personnel and their published words, there were feelings of optimism equalling the optimism of the business world, whose emerging participants sensed Vietnam was going to boom.

The businessmen, both local and foreign, were right. But the boom did not include the media. True, newspapers today are wealthier, and most now claim they can be self-sufficient. That claim will be thoroughly tested when they are asked to account (or pay rent) for the buildings and equipment they have been using free of charge. Many of those assets were confiscated from fallen South Vietnamese Government leaders, or businessmen who correctly predicted the new Communist government would not offer a healthy business environment for them and departed before 1975.

What did not flow on to the media and the aspiring youth who have since entered journalism training courses, was the freedom to establish independent publications, the freedom to seek and pay for training abroad without the state's interference, the freedom to write differing political and social views from those of the Communist Party, the freedom to operate commercial radio stations, film and television studios and the freedom to enter into joint ventures with foreign media companies who would suit their personal or national aspirations. No private publishing enterprise of any substance exists in Vietnam today and there seems little hope any will while the VCP remains in power. Training, materials, personnel, access to communications lines and above all, licensing is controlled firmly by the Party and in any one year in any national political conference leaders affirm and reaffirm the state's steel-willed desire to totally control the press.

There have been small shoots of freedom allowed. The press each year seems more active, colourful, and certainly wealthier and more aggressive than ever. Many journalists are making fair salaries, many journalists and media office staff are employed and gaining valuable experience from foreign correspondents and many young journalists are being trained abroad, albeit under the usual family hostage system which involves firm penalties should they seek asylum abroad. The Prime Minister takes many loyal journalists with him on his frequent tours abroad and no senior minister travels abroad without press representatives to report his every move. But the reports each of these journalists send back are almost identical as well as repetitive in content and contain no serious analyses.

Those small luxuries have satisfied some sectors of the media. They may one day be the basis of a backlash on government, for it is common for those who see the wonders abroad to wish to seek them again and again. But that is precious little upon which to base a campaign for wider press freedoms and independence in publishing. One must conclude that whilst most players in today's media in Vietnam are probably personally happier and better off than they ever were, they are generally not satisfied with the hand they have been dealt in the new 'market driven' economy. Frustrations are never far below the surface. In any discussion, whether it be with a government media guide or a government newspaper or television employee there quickly emerges the same main complaints: Party interference, Party choice of chief editors, Party direction on political dissent (like the Hue riots) or on 'national events' (such as the Nha Trang air crash), and Party screening procedures for overseas training. For writers the licensing system and the Party's hatred of satire and the threat of jail for publishing or voicing dissenting views or "duality in government" (as suggesting a second political party is described) are at the top of the list. The existing freedoms are trivial and cosmetic. The desired, necessary freedoms are withheld. No substantial changes are on the Party's political agenda. While the Party remains in power there seems little hope these freedoms will ever be introduced.

Notes

1. Round Table Conference 20 January to 5 February to which former Western Vietnam war correspondents from 1968 were invited to commemorate the 20th Anniversary of the Tet Offensive. Speakers included Prime Minister Nguyen Van Linh and Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach. Both have since retired but both were credited with reforms to the Constitution and policies which led to the policy of economic renovation. The real purpose of the Round Table Conference was to announce these sweeping changes.
2. The Sixth Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, meeting in Hanoi in September and October, 1987, decided on historic changes that would (a) restructure the national economy, (b) readjust the socio-economic management system, and (c) expand foreign economic relations.
3. All through the six-year period from January 1988 to January 1994, the Ideology and Culture committees regularly called in the senior journalists from all sectors of the media to be told of censorship or indoctrination rulings and 'give guidance' on how news is to be handled. In 1993 a Yak turbo-prop plane crashed into a mountain on its way to Nha Trang from Tan Son Nhut airport (HCM) killing all but one aboard. The news was broken two days later by Cathy Callo of Reuters, who heard the news accidentally, in the Norfolk Hotel in Ho Chi Minh City, where one of the men killed had stayed. Had it been left to the VNA and the Party censors, this report would never have been released. Even *Hang Khong Vietnam* (Vietnam Airlines) in Hanoi did not disclose the number of crew and passengers killed until two days later, and then only after considerable pressure from Nguyen Khuyen, editor of the Vietnam News in Hanoi, who had protested the airline's handling of the matter.
4. News of Vietnam's weather was a state secret for almost three decades in the north and nearly fifteen years in the south.
5. There was a supreme irony in this form of censorship. Many party leaders in general discussions with the author said inter-alia "our country is too poor, we do not want to tell others of misfortune, we do not wish to appear as beggars". But when news of coastal misfortunes in 1988 were published international agencies not only gave much needed help but sent in valuable equipment to help monitor and therefore prevent such devastation. The aid has been wisely used, according to international agencies.

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6. Author's August 1993 interview with Nguyen Khuyen, then senior VNA reporter in Ho Chi Minh City. Nguyen, despite considering himself a battle-hardened war correspondent, was nonetheless deeply shocked when he saw and reported the massacres. To his deep concern, his reports were never published. "A small group of us gathered after this order came down from above. We were offended and disturbed, but could do nothing. We instead went out for a cup of strong coffee and a smoke. Had we had something stronger than coffee available we would have polished that off. The stink from the massacres of innocents seem to pervade the office for months."
 7. Australian-born journalist Wilfred Burchett says he knew of the Pol Pot massacres of Vietnamese all through 1977 and 1978. Obviously he chose to follow the Vietnam Communist Party's line in suppressing the news of massacres because, as the VCP said later, such news was not in the "best interests of Socialism". Burchett was certainly in the Long An region during this period, as two senior Hanoi Foreign Press Centre guides attest. Both said they had worked briefly as interpreter for Burchett along the Cambodian-Long An border. See Burchett, Wilfred. (1981) *Triangular Relations: The Frontier War*. New York. International Publishers. Chapter 10.
 8. The Vietnam News Agency files from this period, which the VNA graciously allowed the author to copy during two month-long research periods in the VNA headquarters in Hanoi in 1993 and 1994, provide an extraordinary record. For example, while the killings were actually taking place not far from Long An just west of Saigon, in 1978, an Australian delegation headed by anti-Vietnam war activist Jean McLean was being entertained in Ho Chi Minh City. Despite the massacres being a 'public secret' none of these visitors ever got a scent of them and the delegation returned to Australia and presented a rosy picture of the country when actually it was at its lowest ebb since the fall of Saigon, in 1975.
 9. Author interview with *Vietnam News* journalists, Hanoi, August, 1993. In 1993 Khuyen said he and other senior war correspondents were acutely aware of this advantage given to Pol Pot and still today regret they remained silent and regard the Party's suppression of their reports in 1977 as a mistake.
 10. Refugees into Thailand had carried early reports which alerted the Western press. Then followed an avalanche of reporting, while inside Vietnam only those with access to clandestine short-wave radios knew of the extent of the Cambodian disaster.
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11. There is still today in central provinces, especially around Da Nang and Hue, a deep resentment of Hanoi in general and the Party in particular, because little attention was paid them during and after terrible disasters where hundreds of people lost their lives every year through cyclones, floods and landslides. "All we got was speeches. No money, no help, no sympathy, no publicity," was a comment openly translated by an official Foreign Press Centre officer when in August, 1990, he spoke on my behalf to the manager of the Government owned Railway Station Guest House, at Hue, who said almost his entire family had perished in natural disasters.
 12. Vietnam is in a state of economic boom, especially in the southern regions, led by Saigon. Even in Hanoi, previously a sleepy hollow, poor people today are renting their houses two years in advance for AUS\$200,000 down payment. Thirty hotel rooms ready to use are built every week in Saigon. Danang's suburban population has almost doubled due to the increase in building activity. Vietnam today exports more than 100 times (in US\$ value), what it exported when it was allied to the Soviet Union and relied only on the Comecom nations for foreign currency.
 13. The authorities can also change their minds, on a whim. In Ho Chi Minh City in late 1993 a local writer published a book on economics (in Vietnamese) and when he had the book reprinted he went to a new publisher. Although copies of the first print run were still openly available, the authorities banned the second printing. No reasons were given and the author lost heavily. Source: *Saigon News Reader* researchers, March, 1994.
 14. In a March 1994 article in *The Australian* Lonely Planet publisher, Tony Wheeler, said his pet hate in Asia was the Vietnam Government. He said they first expelled his (American) travel writer for "no reason at all," then photocopied his book. This was not quite true. His 'writer' was expelled for pretending to be a tourist and falsifying his immigration documents. The photocopying of his book was done by street publishers, and his book is just one many photocopied by Vietnamese vendors.
 15. The comment was from one of my interpreters, who was dismissed from the Foreign Press Centre for leaking similar material to Reuters press agency in Hanoi.
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16. The author's first northern interpreter, Mai Huong, reported in 1990 that diplomats she knew would no longer take children to Pyong Yang because they were taught to salute Kim Sung's photograph so often they "lost their minds", and would cry if they could not find a photograph to salute. The article was widely praised.
 17. In Saigon the chief censor's office is conveniently located in Nguyen Thi Minh Khai Street, District 1, the same street as the Vietnam News Agency, and close to the Foreign Office.
 18. Foreign journalists and business people alike were forced to stay at the Cuu Long during the 1988-1990 period. It was common to hear businessmen raising their voices outside the hotel's switchboard room complaining about the wasted time and money in waiting for someone who could speak their language.
 19. The irony was the listeners hardly ever understood the conversations. The French, for example, used argot (slang) which was impossible for the Vietnamese to comprehend. Michelle Gaul who leased a hotel in Vung Tau (but had to make his calls from the Cuu Long Hotel in Ho Chi Minh City) would storm away from these difficult international calls - to Paris via Moscow in the 1987-1991 period - and go into the Majestic Cycle Bar shouting: "How many secrets can you discover from ordering five tonnes of wheat flour?"
 20. At the Hoa Phuong Hotel in Cach Mang Thang Tam 90 in District 1 guests during 1992-93 were frequently abandoned while political pep-talks were held in the lobby.
 21. Newly arrived correspondents unwittingly provided the older hands with entertainment during such interviews in the 1988-90 era. When a 'listener' dropped uninvited into a chair in the interview area the new correspondents would stop talking and politely wait for the man to 'realise his mistake' and move on. There ensued a long silence while the listener perhaps started smoking, relaxing and settling in comfortably, to the annoyance of the correspondent.
 22. Many key personnel in the Ministries of Agriculture and Heavy Industry have no knowledge of industry or agriculture, and admitted it.

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23. According to Vietnam's Press Code all newspaper editors must have training in journalism, knowledge of one foreign language, and a formal tertiary degree. There have been no new major appointments in recent years to test the system, but many of the incumbents do not meet any of these criteria.
 24. Terry Hartney is part of Australia's Volunteers Abroad scheme, the linear descendant of Volunteer Graduates which was very successful in Indonesia in the 1950s and 60s. The graduates live locally, work normal office hours in normal professional offices and receive a little above local wages. There are two trained Australian journalists in Hanoi, Terry Hartney (Radio Vietnam) and more recently, Paul Cleary, from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, working on the *Vietnam News*.
 25. But many loyal journalists are being rewarded by their leaders not in the form of overseas training, but by being included in overseas trade and political entourages. It is now not uncommon for six to eight journalists to accompany the present Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet on a tour through Europe. They do not, however, stay abroad for training.
 26. Thai Binh of the Foreign Press Centre of Hanoi was sent to India rather than Australia, where he wished to study. He returned to Hanoi after six months in New Delhi, speaking with an almost unintelligible Indian-English accent over his original Vietnamese accented English. The FPC sent no one else to India.
 27. Today's journalists are much more enlightened. But it was a widely known part of the re-education propaganda that Castro's Cuba along with Vietnam's brand of Socialism would cause the US to disintegrate and indoctrinators apparently sincerely believed Cuba was a world power.
 28. The design included two separate offices for directors, but only one toilet, to be shared by twenty two men and women.
 29. The *VIR* was founded by Australian interests including former *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter Nick Mountstephen. However, the venture suffered a series of financial crises and sold the majority share to Belgian interests in mid-1993. According to Brisbane consultant Evan Ham this newspaper may, by the end of 1994, be sold to the Australian Consolidated Press.
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30. Saigon is the name of the central business district of Ho Chi Minh City. Journalists and publishers all refer to the Saigon Press, not the Ho Chi Minh City press. It is rare to hear Southerners refer to the city as anything but Saigon, an active rejection of the Communist Party's new name for the city.
 31. The Swedes have always been generous with Vietnam, never forgetting the media and the arts. Strangely, their generosity has not always been appreciated by Vietnam. The European media tour by the Prime Minister in 1993 did not include Sweden on the itinerary.
 32. Indonesia's newsprint prices are ten to fifteen per cent higher than Chinese newsprint, but is superior. The advantage of the Chinese paper is that it is readily available.

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Frank Palmos

One of Australia's outstanding international journalists, Frank Palmos currently lives and works in Perth. He covered Indonesia and Vietnam for the international press in the 1960s and 1970s. He is the author of *Ridding the Devils* (1990, Bantam) and the English version of the acclaimed Vietnamese novel *The Sorrow of War* by Bao Ninh, which won the Sunday Times (UK) International Novel of the Year Award for 1994. He is currently writing a thesis on the press in Vietnam at Edith Cowan University.

The Centre for Asian Communication, Media and Cultural Studies, Edith Cowan University.

The Centre seeks to Provide a focus for the study of communication and culture in the Asia region. Australia's increasing involvement in Asia requires an awareness of Asian media processes and institutions, their cultural positioning and discourses. Additionally there is a need to understand the way in which the Australian media report Asia. These two discourses intersect and shape both the flow of public information between the two regions and their understanding of each other. An attempt to achieve an awareness of this complex process determines the aims, objectives and research programme of the Centre for Asian Communication, Media and Cultural Studies.

Aims and Objectives

The Centre aims to:

- develop a research profile in the field of Asian communication, media and cultural studies;
- promote an awareness of the importance of the emerging mediascape to contemporary Asian affairs;
- bring together academics, journalists and students working in the area to explore current and relevant issues and topics in the field of Asian communication and cultural studies;
- organise seminars, workshops, and conferences to promote research in the field;
- publish works that promote an awareness and understanding of the field;
- establish a Visiting Scholar programme.

Research

The Centre has established research programmes in Indonesia and China that look at the impact of satellite television and cable television systems respectively. The Centre is also involved in research that is examining issues relating to the 'law of the skies', an issue that is perceived to be of great significance throughout Asia.

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